

CAF Douglas SBD-5 Dauntless BuAer 54532

A-24 or SBD?

The research and history was authored by the Dixie Wing's own pilot Keith Wood.

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As one of the pilots that currently fly the Commemorative Air Force's Dauntless, I often wondered about the history of the airplane. Where was it built? Had it ever seen combat? How many different owners has it had since World War II? Most of what everyone knew about the Dauntless (or thought they knew) was the information that was originally posted on the Dixie Wing's web site:

"Our "Lady in Blue" and the pride of the Dixie Wing, the Douglas "Dauntless" SBD-5 dive-bomber was assigned to us by the headquarters of the Commemorative Air Force (CAF) in 1991. The Dixie Wing's "Dauntless" was built at the El Segundo factory in California. After the war, it was sold to Mexico as XB-QUC and used for aerial photography until mid-1964. Ed Mahoney (sp) acquired it in 1965 and it was subsequently purchased by the CAF in 1970 and flown to San Antonio, Texas, and registered as N54532. It moved to Harlingen, Texas in October 1978.

Other sources on the web and in print indicate that the CAF's Dauntless was with Seaboard and Western Airlines after World War II, then went to the Fuerza Aerea Mexicana (Mexican Air Force), then as an aerial photographer in Mexico until coming back to the U. S. As this very historic aircraft, one of only two airworthy Dauntlesses in the world, is nearly 66 years old, I thought that statement to be a bit sparse, so a little investigation into the history of our Dauntless brought out some interesting information.

Like many in the warbird community and the CAF, I proceeded on the assumption that this airplane was not actually an SBD, but an A24 Banshee. Several of the aforementioned publications and web sites show this airplane to be an A24B Banshee, the Army Air Force version of the Dauntless. Using the serial number, Air Force and Douglas records indicate that Douglas A24-B, 42-54532 was one of the 615 A-24B-10-DTs built for the USAAF under Contract AC-28716 of November 12, 1942. It was built not in El Segundo, California, but in Tulsa, Oklahoma in September of 1943 and delivered to the USAAF on September 14, 1943 with serial number 42-54532 and a construction number of 17371. Upon receipt by the USAAF, it was flown to Oakland, California, then to Long Beach, California where it was loaded on a ship and taken to the Hawaiian Air Depot, Hickam Army Air Field in Hawaii. It was then assigned to the

Seventh Air Force, Pacific Theater of Operations on October 7, 1943. It was initially assigned to the 420th Sub Depot (Pacific), which was a third echelon maintenance facility.

It is unclear at this point whether 42-54532 was used in combat, as a maintenance trainer, or in the inglorious wartime role as an airfield hack, but it was sent to Hawaii in the time period leading up to Operations FLINTLOCK and CATCHPOLE, which were operations in the Gilbert Islands. In December of 1943, shortly after arrival of 43-54532 in Hawaii, A24's from Oahu and Canton Island assembled on Makin Island to begin taking the fight to the Japanese.



3 Dec. 43 - A-24B, s/n 42-54459 taxiing at Makin Island. USAAF Photo

Both the 531st Fighter Bomber Squadron and the 86th Combat Mapping Squadron were involved in these operations, and both used A24's. Many authors say that after being introduced and performing poorly in New Guinea at the beginning of the war, the A24's were withdrawn from service by the USAAF. In actuality, Air Force documents show that the A24's were highly effective against the Japanese in the Gilbert and Marshall Islands in late 1943 and early 1944. The pre-eminent factor in making these A24 raids successful was the fact that at the time, the USAAF had established air superiority in the region. Except for forty-one unescorted sorties over Mille Atoll, the A-24's were accompanied on all missions by P-39's of the 46th and 72d Fighter Squadrons, P-40's of the 45th Fighter Squadron, or F6F's of the Navy. Occasionally, even Navy SBD-5's flew with and accompanied the Army A24's.

At this point, most would say the road in the history of the Dixie Wing's Dauntless gets a little bumpy, but in actuality it comes to a screeching halt. On July 31, 1944 the AAF listed the airplane on the history card as condition "CON" meaning it was condemned. Even more peculiar is the code used as the reason for the condemnation. That code is "M". "M" in AAF parlance at the time means "Missing Due to Enemy Action". One source I spoke to said, "you are flying a ghost!"



Well, I couldn't be flying a ghost, because I was flying a real airplane. While I knew the airplane that I am privileged to fly is certainly a legend in the annals of Navy and Marine Corps history, it is not a ghost. It is a loud, 8000 lb., 1200 horsepower, smoke belching, oil leaking, avgas drinking brute of an airplane. It is loved by those who fly it and was loved by the thousands of aviators that called her cockpit home, and said a silent "thank you" to her every time she successfully brought them home.

If it was written off, did the Air Force sell a wreck to Mexico for parts? Did Seaboard and Western's founders, (both former Air Force pilots) see the wreck sitting in Hawaii and buy it? The answer to both of those questions was no, and after short email exchanges with noted aircraft historians Dan Hagedorn and John Davis, and the acquisition of another history card, the pieces started falling into place.

John and Dan, both members of the Latin American Aviation Historical Society indicated that the mix up likely occurred because there were actually two Dauntless' produced with serial number 54532, the first being the aforementioned A24B, serial number 42-54532 and the second, BuAer 54532, a Navy SBD-5 produced in El Segundo and accepted into Navy inventory on March 3, 1944. As Army Air Forces 42-54532 was lost in July of 1944, the only logical conclusion would be that the CAF's Dauntless is in fact the Navy SBD-5, BuAer 54532.



BuAer 54532 was delivered to the US Navy in April of 1944, and in August of 1944 was assigned to the Bureau of Aeronautics General Representative in Los Angeles where it was likely used as a personal transport aircraft until June of 1945 when it was transferred to the Bureau of Aeronautics Representative (BAR) in Baltimore. It was assigned to the BAR Baltimore until December of 1946 when it went into the pool at NAS Norfolk. There is no evidence that this particular specimen made its way aboard a U. S. Navy carrier and it was stricken from Navy inventory on February 8, 1947 as "transferred to another agency". The "other agency" turned out to be the War Assets Administration (WAA), and when the Dauntless was registered in 1947 as NL1339V, later N1339V, the construction number was given as 6046, the SBD-5, BuAer 54532. A review of sale documents from the WAA however, list the serial number as 42-54532.

N1339V was registered to none other than Andy Stinis of the Skywriting Corporation of America. Interviews with Stinis' relatives indicate the Dauntless was initially purchased to be a high altitude Skywriter, but as the fuel consumption was more than double that of Skywriting's AT-6's, the airplane was sold.

Dan Hagedorn provided information that N1339V was sold to CIA Mexicana Aerofoto on October 18, 1951 and six days later the US registration was cancelled as 'exported to Mexico'. Mexicana Aerofoto registered the Dauntless as XB-QUC. From 1951 to 1966, the Dauntless racked up hundreds of thousands of miles flying as an aerial photo ship for CIA Mexicana Aerofoto. Flying with the company founded by Luis Struck, the pioneer of aerial photography in Mexico, the Dauntless was one of the aircraft Struck used to take countless photos for Pemex, the Mexican Oil Company, the Mexican Electricity Commission and even the U. S. Department of Agriculture in a study of the Mississippi Delta.



After operating for many years with Mexicana Aerofoto, on January 11, 1966 the Dauntless was sold for \$1600.00 to Ed Maloney of the Movie World Planes of Fame Museum, who displayed the SBD in his museum from 1966 until he sold it on March 4, 1971 to the very colorful Robert Griffin, one of the Confederate Air Force's early donors who nicknamed the Dauntless "Speedy D". Griffin, of San Antonio, was one of the CAF's first Dauntless pilots and he is responsible for purchasing and donating not only the Dauntless, but the SB2C "Helldiver" and the FM-2 "Wildcat" which are currently in the CAF fleet.



In 1975, the Dauntless finally made its way aboard an aircraft carrier, participating in the retirement ceremonies for Admiral Ralph W. Cousins, Commanding Officer of the Atlantic Fleet on board the USS Nimitz. The Dauntless, sporting a new paint job in the colors of Adm. Cousins, was hoisted upon the flight deck next to the Navy's newest F-14 Tomcat fighter, which at the time was just entering the fleet. Admiral Cousins, credited with a hit on the Japanese Carrier Shoho during the Battle of the Coral Sea, was reportedly very pleased and surprised that "Speedy D" was aboard for the ceremony.

In the late 70's and 80's, "Speedy D" soldiered on, but never having been properly restored, it was becoming the Hangar Queen of Harlingen, Texas, the CAF's Headquarters. A decision was made by General Staff of the CAF to assign the Dauntless to a unit that could completely restore the airplane to pristine condition.

In 1991, “Speedy D” was assigned to the Dixie Wing of the then Confederate Air Force, (now the Commemorative Air Force) to undergo an extensive multi year restoration. The Dixie Wing’s restoration team, led by Mike Rettke, Gerald Carlson, Tex Layton, many others spent many years restoring the Dauntless to a condition that would make the workers at El Segundo proud.

On a cold February morning in 1999 “Speedy D” took to the air for the first time in almost a decade. With Mike Rettke at the controls, the Dauntless took to the air and actually lived up to it’s nickname, quickly outrunning the T6 “chase” plane that had assembled to assist with the maiden flight.



“Speedy D” has been to hundreds of airshows in the almost 20 years since its restoration and continues to fly to honor the memory of those members of the “Greatest Generation” that designed her, built her, and took her into battle.

The current color scheme of our SBD-5 was in use at the time of the Battle of the Marianas, or "The Marianas Turkey Shoot." It is authentic right down to the smallest details and is operational today, flying to roughly 20 airshows per year throughout the Southeast and Midwest.

